

Whose Time? Which Rationality? Reflections on Empire, 1 Peter, and the “Common Era”

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ABSTRACT

The Roman imperial cults and the early Christians articulated different constructions of time, each offering its version of history built around a particular axis. The Augustan era inaugurated a transformation that reconfigured the imagination of time around the emperor and the *ordo* of statecraft. As a forerunner of later developments in the Christian tradition, the First Letter of Peter, on the other hand, anchored its vision of time in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Using this contrast as a launching point for reflection on social constructions of time, this paper examines the notion of a “Common Era” that has, in recent decades, gained widespread use in the academic practice. Despite its appearance as a more inclusive way of indicating “shared time,” I argue that it functions, rather insidiously, to mask as universal a construct that is in fact culturally-specific and localized in the European Christian experience.

KEYWORDS

1 Peter, imperial cults, decolonial studies, anthropology of time

In September 1793, some four years after the storming of the Bastille that marked the onset of the French Revolution, the new Republic’s Committee on Public Instruction proposed a new calendar that would reflect the liberation of the French people from the dual tyrannies of monarchy and church. September 22, 1792, the day on which the new Republic was offi-

cially proclaimed, was retroactively declared the beginning of Year I, thus displacing both the Gregorian calendar new year's day (January 1st) as well as the older Christian practice of counting time from the birth of Christ. The biblical week of 7 days was discarded in favor of a new "week" made up of 10 days, each in turn made up of 10 "hours," corresponding to the more "natural" decimal system: humans, after all, counted with their 10 fingers. The new sociopolitical order, governed by Reason and Nature rather than—as it was thought—Catholic "superstition," required a new way of counting and moving in time. Though it was ultimately abandoned, the new way of life it sought to create—one freed from the old, Christian order of things—was something its proponents hoped would survive and spread to all of Europe.¹

The politics of time-reckoning was, of course, not a discovery of the Revolution itself. Various other cases can be marshaled to demonstrate the sociopolitical forces that undergird and shape the way in which time is measured, spoken of, narrated. The present essay begins by examining one instance of a much-older tension between two forces whose legacies have remained constitutive of European civilization and thought—that is, a contest for the meaning of time between Roman imperial ideology and early Christianity. This tension, I believe, will illustrate with some clarity the constructed nature of time as well as the historical, social and political dynamics that are always at work in "making time"—dynamics that are often passed over or forgotten, giving what are in fact culturally-specific temporal schemas the appearance of objective "given-ness." Using this historical conflict as a launching point, I will then offer a critique of an academic practice that has become widespread both in biblical studies as well as in other areas of the Humanities today: the use of the terminology of "the Common Era" ("BCE"/"CE") to refer to the Western dating system, formerly indicated by the more overtly Christian designations, "BC" and "AD."

It is, of course, impossible to study such broad (and nebulous) entities such as "Roman imperial ideology" and "early Christianity" without narrowing down the investigation to the more specific, manageable pieces. For the purposes of this study, I will look at the new calendar instituted by the province of Asia in 9 BC as representative of the former (Section I) and an early Christian text, 1 Peter, as representative of the latter (Section II). This comparison will pave the way for a brief discussion of the relation-

1. For a concise study of the ideals and implementation of this calendar, see Mona Ozouf, "Revolutionary Calendar," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Harvard University Press, 1989), 538–547.

ship between power and constructions of time (Section III). Finally, I will argue that the Common Era dating system (BCE/CE), despite its apparent religious and cultural inclusivity, obfuscates the relations of power that at work in it (Section IV).

I. Imperial time: Augustus' empire and the new calendar for Asia

The accession of Octavian in the late first century BC marked a watershed moment not only for the Roman Empire, but also the evolution of ruler cults in Roman-occupied Anatolia. Although we find in Asia Minor a long tradition of the cultic veneration of rulers that predates Roman presence, in the time of Augustus these cults developed a palpable focus on the emperor, his family, and the imperial center.² By 29 BC, Octavian had already granted sanctuaries to Roma and Julius Caesar at Nicea and Ephesus, and was himself the recipient of divine honors at Pergamum and Nicomedia (Dio Cassius 51.20.6–9). In 27 BC, upon his taking the name *Sebastos* (the Greek equivalent of “Augustus”), the number of temples and sacrifices in his honor escalated (Mitchell 1993, 100), accompanied by a proliferation of cults to his successors and other members of the imperial family in subsequent years.

Around 29 BC, the council of the Roman Province of Asia instituted a competition, awarding a crown to the one who succeeded in proposing the highest honors for Augustus.³ Some 20 years later, in 9 BC, the council found a worthy recipient of this reward—none other than the Roman proconsul of the province himself, one Paullus Fabius Maximus, whose proposal was that Asia reorganize the year around the birthday of Augustus. According to Maximus, the most fitting way to honor Augustus would be to designate September 23rd, the emperor's birthday, the beginning of

2. The definitive work on the imperial cults in Asia Minor is of course Simon Price's *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), which remains the most thorough and influential study of the subject to date. Over the years, other important studies have emerged that have developed, nuanced, and at times challenged Price's findings. Among these are Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor, Volume I: The Celts and the Impact of Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Benjamin B. Rubin, “(Re)presenting Empire: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor, 31 BC–AD 68” (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2008).
3. For a more detailed account of the following events and fuller discussions of the inscriptional material, see Price, *Rituals and Power*, 54–56; Robert K. Sherk, *Roman Documents from the Greek East: Senatus Consulta and Epistulae to the Age of Augustus* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins, 1969), 328–337; Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, 32–36.

the new year. Fittingly, he also proposed that this be the date on which all new municipal officials of the province begin their term of service.

The rationale for Maximus' proposal lay in the life and the accomplishments of the emperor himself. In his letter to the council he wrote:

We could justly consider that day [i.e. the birthday of Augustus] to be equal to the beginning of all things. He restored the form of all things to usefulness, if not to their natural state, since it had deteriorated and suffered misfortune. He gave a new appearance to the whole world, which would gladly have accepted its own destruction had Caesar not been born for the common good fortune of all.⁴

Since Augustus had snatched the world from its downward plunge and given "a new appearance to the whole world," Maximus goes on to say, Rome's subjects could justly consider his birthday to be "the beginning of life and existence, and the end of regrets about having been born" (*OGIS* 458.10–11).

In its edict awarding the crown to Maximus, the council of Asia concurred with Maximus' interpretation of the times. Providence, the council declared, had indeed "established with zeal and distinction that which is most perfect in our life by bringing Augustus, whom she filled with virtue as a benefaction to all humanity; sending to us and to those after us a savior who put an end to war and brought order to all things" (*OGIS* 458.33–36). So unsurpassable were the emperor's achievements that not only did he overshadow the deeds of his predecessors, but he also left "to those who shall come no hope of surpassing (him)." As such, "the birthday of the god [Augustus]" was truly "the beginning of good tidings to the world" (*OGIS* 458.38–41). It was, therefore, only fitting to honor this cosmic event with a practice hitherto unknown even to the Greeks—namely, "calculating time to have begun at his birth" (*OGIS* 458.48–49).

Taken together with Maximus' letter, the words of the provincial council reflect an essentially comprehensive outline, a reinterpretation even, of history. The present age, seen precisely as a radical break with all that had come before it, was characterized by cosmic order and the glad tidings of Caesar's benefaction. It must be properly understood, in fact, in terms of Augustus' birth and reign. The council's positive narration of the present thus implicated the entirety of Asia's past, echoing Maximus' charac-

4. *OGIS* 458.5–9 (=IvP 105). The entire inscription seems to be a composite document, comprising the proconsul's letter to the council (lines 1–29) as well as the council's decrees in response (lines 30–84) (Sherk, *Roman Documents from the Greek East*, 328–329). Throughout this essay I have used Steven Friesen's translation, given in *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, 33–35.

terization of it as a long blur of destruction and misfortune. Notably, the council sums up the entirety of Anatolia's past only by what is apparently its most salient, totalizing feature—war (πόλεμος—“a savior who put an end to war”)! All possible futures, moreover, were circumscribed by the Augustan “now”; no successor to the Roman throne could ever hope to outdo the reigning emperor. The present was the apex of time, an unrivalled summit between the valleys of past and future.

Time and the world itself found their renewal and culmination in the life of Augustus and the embrace of his empire. This truth was best inculcated by means of material practice: by being sworn into office on Augustus' birthday, all municipal officials of Asia thus demonstrated to their constituencies that their authority was exercised only by a kind of derivation—a distributed share in the power that emanated from Caesar's throne.⁵ Even then, this power was by no means reducible to the social or political spheres. It bequeathed existential purpose to all: the divine Augustus' entrance into the world marked “the beginning of life and existence, and the end of regrets about having been born.” In altering the segmentation of time, the realignment of the calendar infused time with new meaning. “The new calendar expressed and enforced...the increasing influence of Roman rule in the ordering of human communities in Asia, and the importance of Augustus in the understanding of time” (Friesen 2001, 36).

II. Another time: The Christological reconfiguration of time in 1 Peter

By contrast, in the early Christian text known as the First Letter of Peter (hereafter “1 Peter”), time is configured not around Caesar and his empire, but around an entirely different pole with its own cosmological rationale. This emerges even more clearly when the text of the letter is considered alongside the Asian decree of 9 BC—a comparison all the more warranted by the fact that 1 Peter was addressed to Christian communities in that same province (“...to the elect sojourners...of Asia...,” 1 Peter 1.1).

In 1 Peter, the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is established firmly as the anchoring event of time. Jesus, the author declares, “was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the last of the ages” (1.20). The temporal demarcations “from before the foundation of the world” and “the last of the ages” span “the entire scope of world history from start to close” (Elliott 2000, 376), reimagined around a single pole: Christ. It is therefore what God accomplishes in and through the Christ event that gives time its shape, ordering the world's past, present, and future. Time is accorded directionality: it is not simply the aim-

5. Cf. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, 33–34.

less meandering of days and seasons but rather the unfolding of God's cosmic plan, at the center of which is Jesus Christ.

From the author's perspective, it was precisely the manifestation of Jesus in the world that the Jewish prophets of ages past had strained to see all along, "inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ in them indicated" (1.11). That appointed time which they sought had unfolded—and was even now unfolding—before the readers' eyes (1.12). Only in this present "last age" inaugurated by Jesus' appearance, is the true course and meaning of Israel's prophetic past fully disclosed.⁶ If in underscoring the climactic era of Augustus the provincial decree of Asia reduced Anatolian history to a bleak march of war, misfortune, and destruction, the author of 1 Peter is somewhat gentler: for him, the history of biblical prophecy is a story of preparation, of waiting. Its significance can only be understood in terms of the present eschatological moment illuminated by the entrance of the Messiah into history. The past leans forward, straining into the "now" of Jesus Christ.

The new beginning of all things is, in 1 Peter, not the birth of one Octavian nor the unsurpassable accomplishment that is his life. Rather, it is Jesus' resurrection from the dead, not Augustus' birth, that holds the power to confer "new birth" to the world and induct it into "living hope" (1.3). This new birth stemming from the imperishable seed of God's word (cf. 1.23) makes God "Father" (1.3) and the community of disciples "the brotherhood" (ἀδελφότης—2.17, 5.9).⁷ Christ's manifestation in the world has not only cleaved history in two, but the readers' embrace of the gospel has likewise forged a break in their personal histories. As Eugene Boring masterfully states, in the Petrine schema of time, "the Christ-event bifurcates not only world history but the readers' own story" (Boring 2007, 31).

In 1 Peter, time becomes permeated by an ethical quality and bears consequences for embodied practice. The readers' past was shaped by desires

6. As David Horrell observes, the author of 1 Peter reads biblical texts so as to make Christ "the true subject of biblical prophecy –and, by extension, of the Jewish scriptures as a whole" (1 Peter, T & T Clark New Testament Guides [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2008]). Communal reappropriation of Israel's sacred texts was not unique to the Christian movement: it was shared also by other Jewish sects. For examples, see David G. Horrell, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1998), 28; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 346; Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, ed. Ferdinand Hahn, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 98.

7. I have translated ἀδελφότης here as "brotherhood" rather than the NRSV's more inclusive "family of believers" to emphasize (at the expense of inclusivity, I admit!) its particular level of kinship and the hierarchy it implies: believers are siblings with one Father, God. Here we have an interpretation of time that coincides with a new kinship, as well as the comprehensive transformation of social being it demands.

fueled by their ignorance (1.14) that enshrouded not only them but also their ancestors, from whom they inherited a uniformly futile way of life (1.18). That life, governed by submission to human desires (4.2) and all forms of disorder and dissipation (4.3–4), belongs to an age that has now passed (4.3). Immoral living, in 1 Peter, is characteristic of the Gentiles in their state of anachronistic stupor. As Christians, however, they must no longer live in that way (4.2).⁸ Their new birth initiates them into a new identity with its own moral imperative. As God's elect, Christians must rid themselves of the vices of guile, insincerity, envy, and slander (2.1) and "abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul" (2.11). In place of their "old" past of idolatry and ignorance there is a "new" past—the past of Israel, into which the readers have now been grafted. This transition the author in one place refers to as transference from darkness to light, evoking a crucial Isaianic motif in prophecies of restoration (2.9). Keeping in step with such a shift requires that they "know the time," so to speak. They must undergo nothing short of a cognitive revolution: they must gird up the loins of their minds and remain sober and vigilant (1.13, 4.7, 5.8a) lest they lapse into that Gentile *achronia*. Each of the letter's summons to be sober (νήφοντες, 1.13; νήψατε, 4.7, 5.8a) is related to awareness of time. In 4.7, sobriety is oriented toward the eschatological present: "the end of all [ages] has come near." In 1.13 and 5.8, it is demanded with respect to the future: they must set their hope on the grace to be revealed in Jesus' reappearance and stay vigilant against the enemy's tactics to rob them of future exaltation (cf. 5.6, 8). The future holds not the promise of a perpetual empire but "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" (1.4). The object of future hope is thus counterpoised against the transience of "all flesh," whose glory will inevitably fade like flowers and grass (2.4). The discourse of time in 1 Peter makes this much clear: whereas Gentile immorality is premised on anachronism, a distorted relationship to time, discipleship hinges on vigilance of time's true meaning—its Christological meaning.

III. Constructions of time and the exercise of power

Every configuration of time is also an attempt to make meaning. Each temporal schema engenders a specific worldview and a particular way of construing power relations in society. As such, Nancy Munn observes, power over the structuring (or restructuring) of time possesses a pervasive social and political *gravitas*:

8. J. Ramsey Michaels (*1 Peter* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1988], 58): "It [ignorance] belongs to the old order of existence that is passing away as a result of the coming of Christ."

Authority over the annual calendar (the chronological definition, timing, and sequence of daily and seasonal activities) ... not only controls aspects of the everyday lives of persons but also connects this level of control to a more comprehensive universe that entails critical values and potencies in which governance is grounded. Controlling these temporal media variously implies control over this more comprehensive order and its definition, as well as over the capacity to mediate this wider order into the fundamental social being and bodies of persons. (Munn 1992, 109)

The regulation of time is thus also the attempt to conform subject bodies, not only to a particular rhythm of movement, but also to the cosmology that undergirds it—a cosmology by which that same power is legitimized (in Munn's words, the "critical values and potencies in which governance is grounded").⁹

The Asian decree of 9 BC embodied the logic of empire: it was fitting that each year began on Augustus' birthday since his reign marked a new beginning for humanity and, indeed, the cosmos itself. (The new year, interestingly, began not with his accession to the throne but with his birthday—implying that his existence itself was worth celebrating.) The calendar legitimated imperial rule on the grounds of the salvation (*sotēria*) ushered in by Augustus' reign, affirming Rome's presentation of Augustus as the harbinger of peace into a world that would have otherwise collapsed on itself. By taking office on the day Augustus was born, local officials through the province showed that their authority was not exercised independently but was rather dependent on the imperial center. The autonomy of the Greek *polis*, so key to the political heritage and governance of the Hellenized cities of Asia Minor, became subordinated under the wings of Rome. The new calendar, it should also be noted, structured the year in terms of a series of months configured on the basis of Augustus' birth. This realignment infused Asian time with an imperial valence that literally renewed itself year after year, mediating the imperial order into the very social being and bodies of Rome's Anatolian subjects. Here we have an out-working of the regulation of time which, in Foucault's words, "penetrates the body and all the meticulous controls of power" (Foucault 1979, 152).

9. On the sociopolitical implications of time configurations, see, e.g. Clifford Geertz, "Person, Time and Conduct in Bali," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 369–411; Edmund Leach, "Two Essays Concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time," in *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: Athlone, 1961), 124–136; Maurice Bloch, "The Past and the Present in the Present," *Man* 12(2), (August 1, 1977): 278–292; Arjun Appadurai, "The Past as a Scarce Resource," *Man* 16(2), (June 1, 1981): 201–219; Barbara Adam, *Time and Social Theory* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

If the imperial cults filled time with symbols and structures of Roman power radiating from Caesar's throne in Rome, 1 Peter disputed that temporal imagination by asserting a counter-discourse. While it did not propose an alternative calendar, it nonetheless challenged the ideology of power that undergirded the Asian calendar. In its author's mind, the Christian bodies that inhabited Anatolia were to conform their lives, not to the time of Caesar—whether that of Augustus or his successors'—but rather to the new moment opened up by the God of Israel, who had intervened decisively in history through Jesus. This intervention has brought the world into “the last of the ages,” an eschatological present that demanded from them a particular way of life, a wholly new way of moving in time. The past was disclosed as a time of preparation: they stood as heirs to the prophetic vision and election of Israel. The future now became oriented toward the fullness of glory to be unveiled at Jesus' *parousia*. As such, the story of their lives was given a new beginning, middle and end—a beginning, middle and end that disrupts the rationale of *imperium* enshrined in the Asian decree. The alternative temporal imagination of 1 Peter engendered an entirely different way of envisioning and moving in reality—one in which Caesar and Rome were decentered and power relocated in the hands of one true God, whose triumph awaited only the inexorable completion of his plan.

The preceding comparison of these two constructions of time serves to demonstrate not only the social-constructedness of time, but also the values and potencies within each time-configuration—the principles that constitute its logic. While anthropologists continue to debate as to whether the experience of temporality or duration is inherent and universal to societies everywhere, this much remains clear: the instruments by which people *measure* (and thus experience) time are conceptual and symbolic. They are linked to events deemed worthy to be organizing principles, whether that is the rising and setting of the sun, the lunar cycle, the birth of a god-man, or the founding of a new republic based on Enlightenment ideals. The experience of time's passing is thus culturally-mediated: in effect, we have no access to the “objective” quality of time other than the structures and units of measurements (minutes, hours, months, seasons, etc) that are construed from within a specific world-view. The imperial and Christian constructions of time were generated by means of differing central criteria (Augustus, Christ), each bearing within it a way of looking at and experiencing the world. In short, how we calculate time is integrally bound up with how we experience it.

IV. Rethinking the “Common Era”

Set in contrast against the Augustan calendar of Asia, the distinctly Christian construction of time in 1 Peter comes to the fore. I wish to turn now to the observation that the framework of time we find in 1 Peter—in which past, present and future are interpreted through the lens of Jesus’ manifestation in the world—remain firmly at the heart of the Gregorian dating system that has become standard today. The designation of years as either those “before Christ” (BC) or after his birth (AD) testifies to the credal significance not only of his identity as the Christ, but also of his birth as *the* event dividing “before” from “after,” darkness from light, law from grace (cf. Jn 1: 4–5, 17). Yet this dating system is not simply a theological construct: it is also a sociopolitical one.

The global ascendancy of this Christian way of calculating of time, in fact, took place rather slowly. Dionysius Exiguus, the 6th-century monk who gave us the custom of calculating time specifically from the year of Christ’s birth, did not intend his work to serve as a new dating system but rather was more concerned with determining the occurrence of Easter in the liturgical year. In the eighth century Bede, for example, did not use the date of Christ’s birth as an absolute temporal marker, and as late as the late sixteenth century, the German theologian and mathematician Paul Crusius and Joseph Scaliger after him preferred to date world events from Jesus’ passion, since they believed that the Gospels provided a verifiable date for Jesus’ death and resurrection but not his birth as such. When in 1627 Domenicus Petavius proposed that the BC/AD system be used as a universal timeline for historians, he still regarded the system as one based not on the actual event, but a common point of reference from which all other events could be dated. Even then, the use of Christ’s birth as a numerical grid for writing history was not consolidated until the eighteenth century (Feeney 2007, 7–8).

I do not intend here to recount in any detail the history of this dating system, but I wish simply to underscore briefly its *origins* in the European imagination (an heir to Classical as well as Christian traditions). Despite its slow and humble beginning, the present and ubiquitous Gregorian calendar, with its way of counting time from (as is now generally admitted, an erroneous) date of Jesus’ birth, has so overtaken modern consciousness that its ideological foundations in the Western Christian imagination are too often forgotten. In the West, it is customary to speak of time in millennia, centuries, decades and years, and date and interpret historical events using numbers—587, 722, 70, 2015—that locate these events on a seemingly comprehensive, even absolute, time grid.

Yet every date is an actual *synchronism*: to number a particular year is to count it from a specific reference point, since we can only measure time in relation to an anchoring event. Feeney writes:

An ancient date is an event—or, to be more precise, any date is a relationship between two or more events. As inhabitants of the BCE/CE grid, we simply cannot help thinking of ancient writers as working with dates, which to us are numbers. But they are not connecting numbers; they are connecting significant events and people. In so doing they are not placing events within a preexisting time frame; they are constructing a time frame within which events have meaning. (Feeney 2007, 15)

The anchor or reference point for each time frame, then, is chosen for its significance. Consequently, the dating of events in relation to Christ's birth that we use today already contains a value judgment about that event. Use a different anchoring event, and you have an entirely different conceptual instrument of time with its own set of values and potencies.

The Gregorian calendar was and is a conceptual instrument—a historically-important one, undoubtedly, but nonetheless one among many others in existence.¹⁰ In Greek antiquity, for example, each city-state possessed its own localized calendar and thus its distinct way of calibrating time, often based on the tenure of local magistrates. (The decree of the province of Asia discussed earlier was thus quite unique in its scope, extending the new calendar to all cities within the province.) Even the casual modern reader of the Books of Kings in the Hebrew Bible can observe the common West Asian method of counting time in regnal years: the fourth year of the rule of King Hezekiah, and so forth. To adduce a more contemporary example: to this day the standard Islamic calendar continues to measure time from the date of Muhammad's migration or *hijrah* from Mecca to Medina, and hence the present year is not 2015 but 1436.

It is evident that the Gregorian calendar, with its bifurcation of time based on Jesus' birth, is at its core a *Christian* instrument. However, it is not only Christian, but also Roman and papal in its legacy. It is for ancient Rome that we begin the (civic) year on January 1st—and that months like July and August are named after Roman emperors. It is thanks to Pope Gregory VII's recalibrations in the sixteenth century that our dates are now 13 days ahead of what they were in the fifteenth century.¹¹ These

10. For the sake of this discussion, I am using the term "Gregorian calendar" quite loosely here, as shorthand the BC/AD and BCE/CE dating grids. This is to emphasize its nature as a construct, and not intended to undermine or ignore the calendar's rather complex historical development nor, indeed, its reliance on actual astronomical data.

11. That is, according to the older "Julian" calendar, still used by most Orthodox Churches today.

Roman, Christian, and papal (and thus European) elements remain interwoven in this single conceptual instrument of time that we use today. Keeping all this in mind, I would like to address the practice, now in vogue in biblical studies as it is in other scholarly disciplines, of supplanting the BC/AD designations of this Gregorian calendar with the allegedly more neutral designations, “BCE” and “CE.”

In an article entitled, “Why Christians Should Adopt the BCE/CE Dating System,” Qumran scholar Robert Cargill urges Christians everywhere to use the “Common Era” terminology on account of its more inclusive nature (Cargill 2009). The BC/AD system, he says, is potentially more offensive because it imposes on others claims of a religious nature (e.g. that Jesus is “the Christ”), but it is also scientifically problematic in that the alleged reference point for this calendar, Christ’s birth, has been erroneously calculated so that Christ was born about 6 years before he was supposed to have been. He writes:

[A]dopting the BCE/CE system allays the discrepancies of the chronologies of Jesus’ life, while the archaic BC/AD system only highlights them. The BCE/CE system is the *de facto* dating system for the scientific community, joining the metric system as a standard that peoples of all nations and faiths can accept. This dating system is also the most widely used system outside of the scientific community. The BCE/CE system requires no conversions and no re-dating of historical events; only the renaming of BC to BCE and AD to CE is needed. (Cargill 2009)

What is remarkable, however, is that Cargill so nonchalantly treats the BC/AD and BCE/CE systems as if they were two distinct instruments. Yet it is of course no coincidence that the BCE/CE system requires no conversions or redating of historical events—the system has not actually changed! Perhaps most telling is his likening of the “Common Era” to the metric system—a comparison which betrays the odd sense, so popular and persistent today, that this construction of time is as “natural” (or even as “objective”!) as measurement conventions derived from the physical sciences.¹²

There is, plainly, nothing “common” about “the Common Era.” While using dating years to and from the beginning of this “Common Era” appears at first to be more inclusive, it quite insidiously masks as universal or “common” something that is fundamentally a Western, Christian, and European construct. Pamela-Jane Shaw writes:

[B]ecause the modern (Christian) calendar...acts as a modern system of reckoning and is universally acknowledged as such, the correspondence

12. And yet even here one must remember that the metric system is rooted in a (European) scientific worldview, as a survey of its history quickly shows.

between day and date, between a moment and its given symbol, is so close that the two tend to be treated as identical. One consequence of this is that the artificial nature of that date becomes obscured; it assumes the privilege...of a universal law. (Shaw 2003, 29)

Who, or what, then, makes it this Christian calendar “common,” and for whom? That it is shared by almost all known societies, that it is ubiquitous and enjoys a dogmatic hold on societies all over the world, is a fact—but it is a fact that needs to be examined and explained, not simply repackaged so as to be more palatable.

What was the historical trajectory that led to the privileging of the Christian calendar over other systems, such that swathes of the academic guild have now come to regard it as a system “common” to all? The answer is an uncomfortable one, for its dissemination is in turn tied to the emergence and spread of European modes and categories of knowledge under the conditions of modern colonialism.¹³ I have neither the expertise nor the time to detail that relationship here. I would like to simply point out that the very notion of a “Common Era” carries with it a Christian—and, more importantly—Eurocentric pretense. Its status as the dominant way of measuring time was not acquired without material and ideological violence in many of the non-Western communities that have adopted it. The prerequisites of “common-ness” cannot simply be passed over.

In recent decades, thinkers in decolonial studies, among other disciplines, have emphasized again and again the situatedness, the particularity, of human knowledge and its production. The idea of a “Common Era,” I argue, is an example of what decolonial scholars have called a “zero point of observation”—that is, a position that claims to be objective and absolute since it has no conditioning factors and therefore simply communicates “reality” in an unmediated way, “as is.”¹⁴ Zero point knowledge claims to be universal because it is knowledge that does not see from any one place; it sees with a god-like perspective, and thus apprehends what is true for all (Banazak and Ceja 2010, 117). The “Common Era” connotes knowledge and segmentation of time without subjectivity, emptied of

13. On this subject, see the seminal essay by Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21(2–3), (March 1, 2007), 168–178. Cf. Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),” *Boundary 2* 20(3), (October 1, 1993), 65–76.

14. For an overview of decolonial thought and “zero point” knowledge, see Gregory Allen Banazak and Luis Reyes Ceja, “The Challenge and Promise of Decolonial Thought to Biblical Interpretation,” *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 4(1), (March 27, 2010), 113–127. Cf. W. D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 26(7–8), (December 1, 2009), 159–181.

history and place, and voided of the relations of power that has rendered it “common.” The Gregorian system, a product entangled in the viscera of Christian Europe’s rise to global domination, is surreptitiously represented as the heritage of all. It is purportedly a system from no-where and thus fitted for everywhere.

The historical tension examined earlier in this essay—that between Roman imperialism and Christianity—underscores not only the constructed nature of temporal schemas, but also the formative roles of ideology and power relations in these constructions. The recalibration of the year to coincide with Augustus’ birthday can be clearly accounted for by the Roman occupation of Asia. However, the Christian configuration of time we find in 1 Peter was, as I have argued, likewise a construct that gained ascendancy by a similar exercise of power—of the kind generated through and in Europe’s colonial practices, whose effects continue today.¹⁵ The Gregorian calendar, with its BC/AD system that the world has inherited from the intellectual and cultural ferment of Europe, will be no less Roman, Christian or European if we switch to the BCE/CE designation. In fact, as I have argued, calling it a “Common Era” amounts to dissimulation about the theology, history, and politics that undergird it. The system is not “common” but Christian, not universal but European. That it has come to be accepted universally is not an accident of history but testimony to the dominance of Western European civilizations on a global scale. This reality is what lies beneath a “Common Era.”

For my part, I will continue to refer to time BC and AD—“before Christ” and “in the year of the Lord,” and I hope that others scholars in the academy, especially in the study of religion, will be willing to consider doing the same. This is not necessarily because Christ is the center of time or the Lord of all (though one may of course believe this!), but so that the relations of power that propelled its propagation and acceptance everywhere in the world can be laid bare and further deconstructed. To use BC and AD is to acknowledge the specificity, the situatedness, of Western Christian time, which must not be equated with “time” itself. To think of it as “Christian time” is, simultaneously, to acknowledge that there are

15. The continuing effects of the historical practices of European colonialism—not only in terms of their residual impact, but more importantly, the patterns of domination that continue to reproduce themselves in contemporary societies and create new situations of oppression—is best captured by the concept of “coloniality” put forth by Aníbal Quijano and others (see Quijano’s essay cited above). Whereas “colonialism” refers to the historical practices that more or less ended with the dissolution of European empires, “coloniality,” conceived as a broader web of domination inaugurated by those practices, continue into the present day.

other ways of counting time, other “times”—and ultimately to recognize the plurality of ways of imagining and moving in the world.

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